

OPINION

THE BATTALION

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Is Hubble history?

Public must ask representatives to support resolutions that would service Hubble



CHRIS GRIFFIN • THE BATTALION

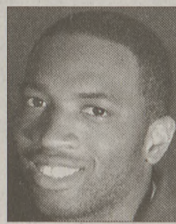
This past week, Texas A&M had the privilege of hosting the Mitchell Symposium on Observational Cosmology. Distinguished astronomers and cosmologists from all over the country lectured at the Bryan-College Station public on a wide array of topics concerning this amazing universe. Despite the diversity of the symposium's lectures, one common theme seemed to unite them — the call to save the Hubble Space Telescope and the plea for all members of the public to respond accordingly. The Hubble is one of the most valuable scientific instruments ever devised and needs to be rescued from an early retirement.

In January, NASA Administrator Sean O'Keefe cancelled a planned 2006 shuttle service trip to the Hubble, according to The Houston Chronicle. The mission is vital to keeping the Hubble in working condition. If this mission does not occur, the Hubble could likely stop operating by 2008. In making his decision, O'Keefe cited budget and safety concerns regarding the Hubble mission trip.

The safety concerns are somewhat reasonable. It has been a little more than a year since the Columbia tragedy. But as Robert Kirshner of the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics correctly pointed out in Monday's lecture in Rudder Tower, the risks associated with repairing the Hubble must be balanced against the potential scientific gains.

The gains are enormous. It is amazing to think what the Hubble has already given in terms of learning about man's place in the cosmos. From the images the Hubble has provided, the age of the universe has been learned (13.7 billion years), the existence of black holes has been confirmed and the image known as the Hubble Ultra Deep Field has become famous for depicting hundreds of the earliest galaxies formed.

As for the budget concerns, these arise from a more political source: President Bush's mid-January announce-



COLLINS EZEANYIM

ment of a plan to build a permanent space station on the moon and use that as a stepping stone to get to Mars.

Assuming the president's desire to further explore the universe is not fueled by the goal of making himself appear more electable, his ambition to send Americans to Mars is one of his few commendable initiatives. But the timing could not be worse. Some experts have estimated such a mission might eventually cost \$1 trillion to successfully execute. At a time of record deficits, expensive tax cuts and the pouring of billions of dollars into war-torn Iraq, the money will unfortunately have to come from NASA cutting the budgets of many of its programs, including the beloved Hubble.

NASA has seriously underestimated the emotional attachment of the scientific community to the Hubble. As of Sunday, nearly 38,000 individuals had signed a petition at savethehubble.org. Ironically, Robert Zubrin, president of the Mars Society, a group that urges that Mars be quickly explored and settled, told The Chronicle that O'Keefe's decision was "a massive crime against science." Indeed, many of the scientists that NASA will count on to support the president's Mars initiative might be less willing to help if the Hubble is forced into early retirement. Thus, O'Keefe should reverse his decision if only to placate many of the scientists who will be integral in maintaining NASA as a viable space agency.

Getting back to the safety issue, repairing the Hubble will be many times less dangerous than traveling to either the moon or Mars. It is hypocritical of NASA to support one mission despite certain risks and simultaneously deny the other mission claiming to be concerned about the same risks.

Kirshner and Dr. Alex Filippenko of the University of California at Berkeley urged the people who attended their talks in Rudder to contact their representatives to advocate congressional resolutions that support servicing the Hubble. All members of the public should ask their representatives to support Senate Resolution 324 and House Resolution 550. The Hubble is too valuable to let die without a fight.

Collins Ezeanyim is a senior computer engineering major.

Public school finance issue still unresolved

Dewhurst's plan presents best solution

The past year has been a turbulent one for Texas public schools. Many districts joined together in a lawsuit against the "Robin Hood" school funding plan, which the legislature repealed without replacing, in the last session. With the legislature's preoccupation with the budget and redistricting last session, school finance was a thorny problem to be put off until later.

But according to The Houston Chronicle, later has come. The Chronicle quoted Texas Gov. Rick Perry as saying, "The time for pondering is over. It's time for action." And Perry's second act after calling a special session was to unveil his new school tax plan. Perry's proposal is not the only one, but it has received the most attention.

The three main parts of his new tax plan are caps on property taxes, increased reliance on "sin taxes" and a statewide tax on business property. Perry's plan faces serious questions about viability, since some of its elements appear to be more short-term "fixes" than long-term solutions. Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst's plan, however, offers school districts more realistic revenue streams.

One of the key planks to Perry's plan is an increase in "sin taxes" and gambling taxes. According to The Bryan-College Station Eagle, the specifics include increasing the cigarette tax to \$1 a pack, charging a \$5 fee to enter adult entertainment establishments and legalizing (and taxing) video gambling terminals.

Taxes based on these activities will likely increase revenues in the short term, but as a long-term measure, these revenues seem unstable. Cigarette tax revenues will fall as people quit, and as more people quit, the proposals related to gambling may also see an eventual drop-off of revenues as people may eventually grow weary of the taxation.

Perry's idea for a cap on property taxes is mirrored in other plans that have been put forward, especially Dewhurst's. But the way Perry wishes to split the tax rolls has drawn many critics, and rightfully so. Perry would split residential from business property taxes and collect the business taxes on a statewide basis. A cap would accompany this split on the maximum tax rate. This upsets many school districts that would be



DAVID SHOEMAKER

denied a major source of revenue and business leaders who fear that it will prove easier to sell school tax increases to voters.

This part of Perry's plan would simply redistribute the pie by having the state collect taxes to get around constitutional equity problems. But it would not bring any new, lasting revenue streams online for future growth. This is the major area where Dewhurst's plan excels compared to Perry's.

Dewhurst's plan makes an attempt to find some lasting, growing revenue streams by creating a broad-based business activity tax. Dewhurst was quoted as saying in The Chronicle that "more than two-thirds of the state's service businesses don't pay franchise or sales taxes now."

A business activity tax would allow the state to avoid higher sales taxes and would remove some of the equity issues since everyone subject to it would be taxed at the same rate. The revenue from this tax would probably fluctuate with business cycles, but would not face the same downward long-term trend as Perry's sin tax proposals.

The other major element of Dewhurst's plan is to cut the school property tax in half and have the tax be collected statewide. Although many districts will not like losing direct control of their revenue, the state must meet the funding equity provisions of the state constitution. And Dewhurst has said that he will reinstate the "two-thirds" rule in the Texas Senate. This would indicate that he feels that he has support, at least in the Senate, for his own plan.

The only major player yet to weigh in on the matter has been House Speaker Tom Craddick. Any bill to revamp the school finance system will have to originate in his chamber. He is certainly weighing the options available to him and trying to determine what kind of changes Texas voters will agree to. But he would be well advised to seriously look at Dewhurst's plan for the future before he makes his own proposal.

David Shoemaker is a junior management major.

MAIL CALL

Bush's tax cut has gotten nation out of recession, benefits all

In response to John David Blakley's April 16 column:

After reading Blakley's editorial on Friday, I was absolutely stunned. What moronic assertions. The tax cuts Bush put into place have helped us out of the recession. Remember those 300,000-plus jobs created last month?

If you know how economics works, you know that when people have money, they tend to spend it on goods and/or services. When the rich do this, it in turn creates jobs for the middle class, which provides the good or service. The middle class then does the same with the money they acquired from those jobs. This allows the economy to grow (Let me explain it for Blakley, it's when the graph goes up and to the right).

The tax cuts were also given to the rest of America, too, but I guess that wasn't important. Also, the Democrat formula "when there is less money coming in than before, something is going to have to go," is dead on. Some of the programs need to go.

If we get rid of half of these needless government programs such as Medicare, which more or less makes senior citizens completely dependent on the government for medical care, we would have more money for worthwhile programs.

Either way, Blakley can go vote for Kerry, and I'll wait until 2008 to see if the Democratic party can nominate a candidate with a spine, then I might consider voting for a Democrat. Bush is easily the lesser of two evils in this race.

Todd Heath
Class of 2007

Terrorism was only fueled by Bush's decision to invade Iraq

In response to an April 15 mail call:

In my four years of rising every morning and turning the pages of The Battalion to the opinion page, I can honestly say that I have never come upon a mail call letter as appallingly vicious and callous as Mr. Branagan's.

Aside from falling back on hackneyed character assassinations of "liberals" and a petty ad hominem attack on Battalion columnist Nicholas Davis who, by the way, seems anything but "liberal," Mr. Branagan displayed a frightening level of ignorance about the incredible human tragedy that is the Iraq conflict.

President Bush's decision to invade and occupy Iraq was an elective one being that Iraq posed no imminent threat to the United States and no credible evidence linking al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein was ever established, as even the Bush administration has now conceded.

And I am not even going to get into the whole post-war "weapons of mass destruction" scandal.

Furthermore, Iraq is now a "central front" on the War on Terror because the Bush administration toppled its government without having a sound plan prepared for a post-invasion Iraq.

This unforfeited folly has created an immense power vacuum that has resulted in an unstable Iraq

where chaos, including terrorism, now prevails. So in effect, the Bush administration actually created the condition that it erroneously thought it was acting to prevent resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy.

And no, Mr. Branagan, we would not prefer terrorists attacking Americans in New York to terrorists attacking Iraqis in Baghdad even though you suggested that you actually prefer the latter. Fortunately for America and Iraq, it does not have to be an either-or proposition. "Liberating Iraqi cities into the ground" would not be palatable either to any rational-thinking and compassionate human being who cares about the fate of Iraq and understands how proceeding down such a reckless and inhumane path will only breed more deadly anti-American violence and instability in that troubled nation.

Bereket Bisrat
Class of 2004

Ring Dance ticket covers costs, all proceeds go to Class Gift

In response to an April 16 mail call:

I would like to make some clarifications to the April 16 mail call regarding Class Council and Ring Dance.

For the past many years, Ring Dance tickets have cost \$35 per person, just as this year.

Our purpose is not to "jack up prices," but to charge an amount so that we are able to cover the cost of the bands, casino, entertainment, gifts, security, marketing and decorations.

All profits go directly to the 2004 Class Gift, the renovation of the MSC Flag Room. Speaking on behalf of both myself as well as the 2004 Class Council, we've spent the last two semesters making arrangements for this Saturday's event.

The members of the 2004 Class Council have been held to a strict requirement of working a minimum of 12 hours in exchange for admission to the dance. Simple calculations divulge that 12 hours of labor at minimum wage equates the cost of two tickets.

Being a member of the Class Council and giving of time, effort and money to facilitate events for our fellow students is a non-paying job. The members of the Class Councils do it because they have a desire to serve their classes and Texas A&M University.

Saying that council members should pay to attend an event they have worked very intently to plan is virtually the same as saying that Coach Fran and team should be charged admission to Aggie football games.

Lindsey Shanklin
Ring Dance director
Class of 2004

The Battalion encourages letters to the editor. Letters must be 200 words or less and include the author's name, class and phone number. The opinion editor reserves the right to edit letters for length, style and accuracy. Letters may be submitted in person at 014 Reed McDonald with a valid student ID. Letters also may be mailed to: 014 Reed McDonald, MS 1111, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843-1111. Fax: (979) 845-2647 Email: mailcall@thebattalion.net